

Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis

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Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis, edited by Andrew Hurley. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997. xiv, 319 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

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Until recently, urban historians have devoted little attention to environmental issues. Instead, they have typically treated the physical environment either as a passive force in urban development—merely the backdrop—or as a dependent variable that was acted upon and shaped by human efforts but that exerted scant influence on city life. During the past decade, however, urban historians have begun to recognize how the environment has influenced the city and how urbanization transformed the environment, often with devastating long-term consequences. *Common Fields*, a collection of essays edited by Andrew Hurley, sheds light on this previously neglected theme, focusing on the environmental history of St. Louis and its hinterlands.

The scope of the volume is impressive. Hurley gathered essays that examine the entire span of the area's history, including analyses of pre-Columbian settlements in the region. The collection also possesses a strong interdisciplinary orientation; many of the contributors are historians, but others, such as William R. Iseminger and F. Terry Norris, are archeologists or geographers, such as Walter Schroeder and Craig E. Colten. Furthermore, the essays are effectively grounded in research on greater St. Louis, relying on local sources and regional themes to explore the complex relationship between urbanization and the environment.

Many of the articles in *Common Fields* examine the shifting "social construction" of environmental issues. They trace, for example, changing assumptions about the relationship between the public good and the physical environment. The essays on the nineteenth century focus on the efforts of policy makers and entrepreneurs to reduce environmental obstacles to economic development. Essays by Eric Sandweiss, Katharine T. Corbett, and Mark Tebeau emphasize how economic issues, particularly the needs of property owners, molded efforts to control the environment. Thus, for instance, the financial interests of insurance companies, land holders, and other groups of individuals shaped public policy regarding paving, zoning, and sewage. Nineteenth-century policy makers typically treated floods, disease, and fire as impediments to private gain rather than as threats to the overall population or as warning signs about imminent environmental crises. Moreover, piecemeal responses to systemic problems most often displaced rather than eliminated public health crises, shifting the

environmental costs of high population density and industrialization, for example, to poorer sections of the city. By the twentieth century, as essays by Craig Colten, Joel A. Tarr and Carl Zimring, Rosemary Feurer, and Andrew Hurley demonstrate, notions of the public good had begun to include consideration of the social costs of pollution and environmental degradation.

The strongest essay in the volume, Tarr and Zimring's analysis of St. Louis's pioneering role in smoke control, explores the process through which citizen groups and policy makers mobilized popular sentiment and transformed public concern about the environment from a focus on the economic needs of the wealthy to an emphasis on the social and public health needs of the community. Combining educational crusades, regulatory efforts, and political and public relations campaigns, St. Louisans, led by smoke commissioner Raymond R. Tucker, dramatically reduced smoke and improved air quality in the city.

Common Fields possesses the inevitable strengths and weaknesses of edited volumes. The strengths are significant: the topic is timely, and the essays are generally thoughtful and well informed. The collection, however, suffers from two weaknesses. First, the essays are uneven in quality. A few explore environmental issues from heavy-handed and moralistic perspectives. Whereas excellent essays by Schroeder and Iseminger explain that the environment was dynamic and mutable centuries before St. Louis became a major metropolis, others emphasize declension and the disappearance of a pure form of nature; Patricia Cleary, for example, contrasts the extractive agendas of European settlers with the attitudes of Native Americans, who, she suggests, lived in harmony with the environment and viewed people and animals as "equal beings" (65).

The second shortcoming represents an error of omission. For all of the subtlety of individual essays, the volume lacks a coherent larger theme. Most of the essays stop short of drawing broader conclusions about the region, the making of public policy, or environmental history. If Hurley's introduction had provided a framework for exploring the changing construction of public policy regarding the environment, the volume would have been doubly impressive. This shortcoming, however, is minor. *Common Fields* is a fascinating collection, and its unevenness underscores the richness and the complexity of environmental history.

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